



INSURANCE DEPARTMENT
STATE OF MISSISSIPPI

FILE No. W-740

DOCKET No. 6548

FIRE MARSHAL'S REPORT

2-13-74

Date Received

Name of Owner Winona City School (Public) White () Colored ()
Address West Powell Street, Winona, Miss.
Location of Property West Powell Street, Winona (Montgomery County)
Name of Occupant Grades 5,6,7,8,9 White () Colored ()
Address Same
Type of Property School Building
Date of Fire February 13 19 74 : Time 7:35 P- M
Discovered by: Unknown
Reported by: Unknown
Origin of Fire: Undetermined, but believed to be accidental
Interested Companies: Amounts American Motorists Insurance Company, Policy
No. 3WT007261A, Date 9-1-73 to 9-1-76, Amt. \$650,000.00

Agency Fidelity Underwriters
Address Winona, Mississippi
Investigation Requested by: T. J. Herrod (Chief of Police)
Assigned to: E. W. Patridge

Statement in Brief of Circumstances of fire or Evidence, if any, of Incendiarism.

I was assisted with this investigation by Mr. Crockett and Mr. Black from the Fire Marshal's office and also the Winona Police Department. I arrived at the scene of this fire on February 13th at the time of the fire.

The building consisted of 23 classrooms, 8 restrooms, 3 offices, 5 janitor supply rooms and a cafeteria. There was an enrollment of about 650 students. The school was intergrated in 1970 and had a ratio of about 50% white and 50% colored. The main wing of this building was running east and west, parallel with Powell Street. There was another wing in the back that extended to the north. This was a brick veneer building and the inside walls were constructed with tile bolcks. The building had a flat roof and the halls were ceiled with lumber that had been removed from an old school building. It was generally in good condition at the time of the fire. The gymnasium was built adjacent to the east end of the wing that paralleled Powell Street, but was not damaged by the fire.

According to the fire department the fire originated about halfway of the wing that extended to the north. The fire department received the call at 7:35 p. m. and when they arrived there were no flames to be seen. However, there was a large amount of smoke and the flames broke through very shortly. The fire very quickly covered the north wing and then spread to the other part of the building. There were no fire walls in the building and the fire traveled very rapidly after it reached the attic. The building described above was completely destroyed by the fire. It is believed the fire had been burning for some time when it was discovered and the building had a tremendous amount of heat in it. It is known the fire traveled very fast and it is very possible this could be the reason.

We made a community investigation and interviewed a large number of people. The school building was surrounded by dwellings and some information was received. It was established several people in the area heard different types of noise and they were in the direction of the school building. They were described as a popping sound or explosion. These sounds were heard as long as 30 minutes before the fire was discovered. All the people that saw the smoke before the fire department arrived said there were no flames at that time. None of the people that were interviewed could give any information as to how the fire started.

It was established by the fire department all the doors to the building were locked when they arrived. Since it was determined by the fire department the fire originated in the north wing in the area of the janitor supply room, the investigation was confined to this area. This was also confirmed by the people in the community. A large hot water heater was located in the janitor supply room. The door at the bottom of the water heater had been removed. The items kept in the janitor room were brooms, mops, waste paper barrel and other supplies. These items were usually kept on the opposite side of the room from the water heater. However, a bucket filled with dirty mops was found sitting against the water heater near the open flame. The waste paper barrel was also located in the same area against the water heater. A dirty mop that had been burned was found at the door opening of the water heater. Some of the mop was removed from the area where the open flames existed. The above mentioned items being located where they were could have very easily caused the fire. It appeared these supplies had been purposely put in this position.

Alex McDaniel, colored male, age 67, janitor in charge of the school building was interviewed. He stated the items mentioned above were always kept across the room from the hot water heater. He said he left the school building about 4:15 p. m. and the supplies were not in the area of the hot water heater at that time. He was the last one to leave the school building and checked the janitors room before he left. McDaniel was interviewed on several occasions and was very specific as to where he left the mops and waste paper barrel. He was also with us when we found the mops and barrel at the hot water heater and said they were suppose to be on the other side of the room. He said he locked all doors before he left. It is not believed McDaniel would set the building on fire. Mc Daniel continued to give the same information each time he was interviewed.

Dener Purnell, colored female, age 38, a janitor that worked on the wing where the fire started was interviewed. We talked to her several times and her statement as to where the supplies were kept was the same as Alex McDaniel. She was sure the mops and waste paper barrel were kept across the room from the hot water heater. However, the last time she was interviewed she was asked where she usually found the mops when she started to work. At that time she said the mops were found all over the janitors room. I am sure the last statement as to where the mops were found is true and it appears there was a certain amount of negligence. I have enclosed a picture of the area surrounding the water heater.

It was established the school building had been broken into on several occasions previous to this fire. We were able to determine nothing had been taken from the offices at this time. Since the fire was discovered at 7:35 p. m. and was believed to be burning for some time, this would have been early for a burglary and arson.

We talked to Dr. Tom Dulin, Superintendent of the City schools and John Perry, principal at the school in question. They were very cooperative and said there had been no racial trouble at the school. They knew of no reason why anyone would set the school on fire.

The insurance mentioned in this report covers only the school building that was destroyed by the fire. At this time we have found no physical evidence of arson and no motive for the school building being set on fire. I believe at this time if the fire was caused by the mops and barrel being placed at the hot water heater, it was accidental. I do not believe further investigation is necessary and I am closing the case. However if there are any new developments you will be advised.

One reason for concern at the time of this fire was because this same building was set on fire on April 16, 1969. At that time it was set off by Charlie Lee Kennedy and Henry Earl Townsend.

Case Closed
2-28-74

E. W. Patridge
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